

PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN IN P. PADMARAJAN'S CINEMA: WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO NOVEMBERINTE NASHTAM

Sreedevi T. ; B. K. Ravi

Department of Communication, Bangalore University,
INDIA.

sreedevi.researchscholar@gmail.com, bkavibu@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Indian cinema has been considered as an intimate medium of communication. Being a strong audio-visual platform, it is a suitable canvas for storytelling to a mass audience. Malayalam cinema as a widely accepted film industry in Indian cinema claims to undergo changes since its inception subjectively and technically. P. Padmarajan a renowned Malayalam author, script writer and director had immensely contributed to Malayalam literature and cinema during the seventies and eighties. The detailing in his screenplays had enriched films as mirrors of society representing various social changes at major times. The women in Padmarajan films have always been a subject of discussion and have led to numerous critical studies. The outline of women characters in his films have always stayed ahead of those times. Hence, this study aims to do a detailed analysis of 'Meera', a central character of the film 'Novemberinte Nashtam' released in the year 1982. This character is shown to undergo multiple transitions through the course of the film. These transitions become even more important to analyse the underlying emotions that this character upholds throughout. Through this research, the researcher is also trying to critically analyse not just the character but also the intimate shift that the P. Padmarajan adopts storytelling through the female protagonist 'Meera' of 'Novemberinte Nashtam'. The psychological understanding of this female character had made the researcher approach this from a stronger and more relevant angle. A critical content analysis would be the primary methodology used for the analysis strictly limiting it to the female protagonist and developments of the story centred around this character. P Padmarajan and his visualisation of women as a director has been extremely powerful and rich in content which will be remembered by every film enthusiast in a long time and will always uphold Malayalam cinema.

Keywords: Portrayal, critical analysis, gender, relationships, P. Padmarajan

INTRODUCTION

During the seventies and eighties, a major growth of 'Middle cinema' was seen in Kerala. Films which are more into 'naturalism', 'realism' had received wide acceptance among the audience. This had taken a drastic shift in producing film of those times technically and subjectively. In 1965, P. Padmarajan had begun his career as a Program announcer in Thrissur's All India Radio Station. His initial major contributions were to Malayalam literature and in 1972, Padmarajan received Kerala Sahithya Academy Award for his very first novel 'Nakshathrangale Kaval'. In 1974, he entered the world of cinema with screenplay writing for the film 'Prayanam' (The Voyage), for debut director Bhrathan, with Balu Mahendra's cinematography. Padmarajan has written eighteen screenplays for other directors including Bharathan, K.G.George, I.V.Sasi, Mohan and Joshi. Padmarajan began his venture as a film director in the year 1979, with 'Peruvazhiyambalam' (The Street as a Choultry) which received National award for Best Regional Film and State Awards for Second Best Film and best Script writer of the year. He has directed eighteen movies based on his own screenplays written between 1979 to 1991 as he passed away on 26th January 1991 in Calicut,

Kerala. Initially Padmarajan wrote a story named 'Parvathykutty' inspired from a real-life brother and sister whom his wife Radhalakshmi Padmarajan had known. Later, in 1980 loosely based on the story of 'Parvathykutty' he developed the screenplay for a movie named 'Shalini Ente Koottukari' (Shalini My Friend) directed by Mohan with similar brother sister connection. And Novemberinte Nashtam can be said as another extended attempt on inspiration of real-life brother and sister his wife had known.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In the book, 'Padmarajan:Cinemayum Manashasthravum' (translate. Padmarajan: Cinema & Psychology) by Rakesh Nadh published by Olive books, the author has attempted to study Padmarajan's film from a psychological aspect too. The female protagonist 'Meera' of Novemberinte Nashtam and her mental transitions in each stage of her life has been tried to understand and relate with Freudian theory of psychoanalysis connected to mental illness.

The book, 'Padmarajante Priyapetta Thirakadhakal' (translate. Padmarajan's favourite screenplays) published by DC Books constitutes five screenplays written by P.Padmarajan including 'Novemberinte Nashtam'. The screenplay of film 'Novemberinte Nashtam' lightens a close textual understanding of the characters and development of the story. The screenplay narrates the film which gives researchers an in depth and steady analysis of the film with minute detailing.

In the research study, "The Never-Ending Rain and Thoovanathumbikal", by Nikhil A Banerjee, he tries to view the female protagonist 'Clara' of Padmarajan's directorial Thoovanathumbikal from the aspect of Self Actualisation theory by Abraham Maslow. The boldness and openness of 'Clara' who is from a poor, problem centred background and her liberated decision to enjoy the fullest has been done a comparative study to another female protagonist of the film 'Radha' while who is from a secured family background. The differences of the two women characters in the film 'Thoovanathumbikal' has been tried to draw along with male character 'Jayakrishnan' and his approaches to them. The stereotypical idea towards women prostitutes practised till then in the movies and in Thoovanathumbikal by P.Padmarajan also was discussed in this research.

OBJECTIVE

The primary objective of this study is to understand the portrayal of the central woman character in P.Padmarajan's directorial Novemberinte Nashtam. The researcher also aims to analyse the central woman character through the relationships she shares with others in the film and also how the director brings the notions of mental health in this movie which are much ahead of those times.

PLOT

'Novemberinte Nashtam' (November's Loss) released in 1982 was the fourth directorial attempt of P.Padmarajan starring Madhavi (Meera), Mohan (Balu), Prakash Pothan (Das), Bharath Gopi (as father of Meera and Balu) and Surekha (Ambika) in leading roles. His previous three directorial ventures were completely based on characters and story set in a village. Novemberinte Nashtam, in comparison, was set in an urban space with modern characters. This movie narrates the story of a teenage girl 'Meera', the central character of the film who has certain mental weaknesses or flaws. The plot revolves around Meera and her elder brother Balu who are abandoned by their father due to his remarriage. Meera is shown to fall in love with a senior in college named Das, an extremely practical person who prefers to prioritise his career. Das breaks up with Meera after which she is shown to undergo mental distress. Post treatment Meera's brother and her father plan to get Meera married but she refuses. Later as the story progresses Meera and Das are still seen to be in a relationship, but

when Meera's brother approaches Das he denies to marry her and continues to take advantage of her weaknesses. At the end Meera is shown to murder Das after expressing two extreme emotions together i.e Love and Revenge. The film closes with a write up that states Meera was found dead at the mental hospital where she committed suicide.

THEORETICAL APPROACH

Sigmund Freud who was the founder of psychoanalysis proposes psychoanalysis theory of personality in which he mentions about the three elements of personality – id (uncontrolled), ego (repressed) and superego (authorities over id and ego). The understanding of human mind and personality development since the initial stages of childhood has been theoretically stated and discussed in Sigmund Freud's theory of psychoanalysis. In the book, 'A Companion to Film Theory' edited by Toby Miller and Robert Stam, the eighth chapter discusses Psychoanalytic film theory by Richard Allen aimed to reflect and reconsider them in the context of visual fictions. The interpretation and psychoanalytic theory in cinema lead feminist theorists to understand the role of cinema and gender further.

Psychoanalysis is a popular method of understanding characters in terms of the visual context in the cinema or for the interpretation. Thus, psychoanalysis has been used in this study for analysing the central character of Novemberinte Nashtam, 'Meera', because it revolves around how her childhood issues have edged something into and definitely has decided her future.

METHODOLOGY

In the context of mainstream cinema as a mass media tool, the narration and the subjects of the cinema hold lots of significance to be studied. The systematic and scientific research method aims to draw relevant and accurate findings with analysis. In this specific research study, the researcher adopts a qualitative research methodology in which the content analysis of the film, 'Novemberinte Nashtam' has been done. The detailed understanding of female protagonist 'Meera' and the development of the story centred on her has been attempted to examine.

BACKGROUND, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Significance of the title

The titles of Padmarajan's films are always a subject of discussion and appreciation. Few include Deshadanakkili Karayarilla, Moonapakkam, Oridathoru Phayalavan, Koodevide. The rich experience of being a renowned literature person and screenplay writer in the career has helped Padmarajan as a filmmaker to choose suitable titles for his movies.

Similarly, the title of this movie 'Novemberinte Nashtam' (November's Loss) is also found to capture the interest of audiences and critics like any other Padmarajan film titles. What is there to lose for November? Just December. The director has made a deliberate attempt to be careful not to reveal the reason for such a title throughout the movie. At the end when a writeup appears on the screen about Meera found handing committed suicide dated on November audience will be able connect to the idea of the title, 'Novemberinte Nashtam' (November's Loss). But why has the director chosen only November and not any other month of the year? The director must have tried to relate Meera's death with the popular notion that November as a period more deaths, cold, loses and without much happenings around. Unlike the common practise of using the female protagonist names in the title, Padmarajan had a brilliant choice of apt names/title for his movies depending on the story and mood of them, thus does justify the whole.

Obviously, as the name indicates the movie 'Novemberinte Nashtam' is not a happy story with a positive ending. But it's a story of Meera whose destiny is to lose what she wants in life. She lost her mother, father, pleasant childhood, secured parental upbringing which had definitely brought severe mental issues to her. Above all, Das whom she meant a lot had cheated and misused her taking her mental weakness. The continuum of tragic consciousness Padmarajan used in the life of Meera in Novemberinte Nashtam further ended up as a tragedy for her. Similar to many his other films like 'Moonnampakkam', 'Oridathoru Phayalvan', 'Njan Gandharvan' which was a tragedy or tragic end, Novemberinte Nashtam also dealt the same.

Understanding 'Meera'

The character, 'Meera', enacted by brilliant actor Madhavi, was grown up and taken care of by her elder brother Balu because he did not have a childhood with parental love and affection which in turn caused an increased adult depression and related problems which later shows in the film as the film progresses. She shares a very strong bond with her elder brother which is reflected in different instances throughout the movie. Meera is also shown to have a strong liking towards Das which eventually turns out to be a love hate relationship which is also shown in the film. Meera misses the mother figure having in her life which she prepares to replace with Das's mother. The disturbing childhood might be the reason for her interest in the idea of leading a family life together with Das. The insecure childhood of Meera because of her own father brings fear on him in her mind. Because all these characteristics one can come to understand this could possibly be the root cause for Meera's mental health issues, like shown in the development of the story, which could have happened during her childhood days.

Meera and the relationships that she shares with other characters helps to understand the characteristics of Meera at different occasions in her life.

Meera and her father

In the movie, the father character of Meera starred by veteran actor Bharath Gopi was shown as an irresponsible father who once abandoned his children at a very young age and shamelessly approached them several times for help later. The character was never visualised as a strong, rude or raising voice against his children's kind of father which was in contrast to the imagination built up by the female protagonist, 'Meera'.

The film begins with the dream of Meera in which she was shown in a christian bridal attire (white gown) with Das (simple black attire) on a running horse carriage happily with friends around and colourful balloons flying in the air. Suddenly, Meera's father blocks the couple and tries to attack Das then she wakes up from the sleep to reality. This shows that even in dreams at this age Meera was scared about her father throwing dark on her happiness as the ultimate thing she looks for in life is 'Das'.

There is a contradiction in the image of the relationship Meera shares with her father in comparison to her brother which is of his incapableness. Balu and her father share a very not so stereotypical relationship shown in other films of those times. For instance, there are scenes in the movie where Balu offers a cigarette to his father, in another scene he teases and inquires "ipo engane und vellamadi" (translate. How's drinking going on now?). This visually shows a very modern kind of thought process where it's open enough to share a cigarette or to pose such questions to a father unlike the stereotypical father son relationships. Also, there are multiple scenes in the movie in which the father approaches Balu to seek financial help when Balu openly criticizes father for not being responsible. In such instances, father is portrayed as a weak, incapable, helpless, shameless person, not adamant in nature, but the

inner mind of Meera always has a fear of him which could be due to her abandoned childhood experiences. This has resulted in bringing a huge distance or no communication only with her father and throughout the film, Meera tries to stay away from the vision of her father and doesn't share any dialogue with him.

Meera and her brother

The character Balu, starred by actor Ramachandran, was shown as a caring and friendly elder brother of the female protagonist, 'Meera' in the film 'Novemberinte Nashtam. Throughout the movie, the character, Balu was shown as a strong and responsible brother who has struggled since childhood to lead a life and take care of his sister. He was conscious about her mental weakness due to unfortunate incidents that happened in her life and tries to help her bring to normal life. In the film his experiences seem mould him realistic and practical at the same time never fails to keep a good and open rapport with people including his own irresponsible and dependent father.

Balu and Meera share an unusual brother sister mental bond with each other. Balu is somebody who has witnessed all the vulnerabilities of his younger sister Meera since childhood and he has been the only support and courage Meera always has about which she was very much aware about it too. There is a scene in the film when Balu asks Meera about her relationship with Das and she admits it without much inhibition. And Balu being a brother has a freedom to openly ask her if she has a physical relationship with Das to which she says No and Meera conveys to him her wish to marry Das.

Also, in the scene When Das confesses about his decision to break the relation with Meera to Balu, though at first Balu naturally gets angry, soon he requests Das not to disclose this to Meera now as this can affect her life itself because Balu is aware about her mental weakness. Balu has a clear idea about how Meera will react to the separation with Das and injury Das might do to her mentally; it reflects as the story progresses.

There are several scenes in the film when Balu's concern and affection for Meera has been evident. One of them should be when one-night Meera loses control over her mind and sits in her dark bedroom while Balu tries to console her like a little girl and she expresses that she's scared because somebody is inside the room. Meera seems broken and urges Balu's bedroom and compels him to sleep next to her so that 'ah aaland wants to' (that person) will not come near to her. Followingly, Meera requests him to chant mantras not to have bad dreams while sleeping and like a kid she reciprocates along with Balu. This particular scene was shot in dark with minimal light as this is the heartbreaking situation of a helpless brother and his mentally down sister. She must have an inner belief that 'Balu' will be there for her and always helps to protect her because she wasn't ready to stay away from his presence. This scene hints about the emotional dependency of Meera on her elder brother Balu which might have happened among them since childhood as there was never the presence of parents too.

Meera and her Love Interest

In the movie, the character Das, starred by Prathap Pothen and dubbed by P.Padmarajan himself, was shown as somebody who prefers only his own happiness and well being in the practical life. He doesn't bother losing someone in life even forever as he believes certain incidents are much normal and inevitable in life to move ahead and need to be sensible.

Meera always wants a married life with Das and has never looked at this relation as a kind of passing fancy. There are combination scenes of Meera with Das set in their college campus helping to define their relationship with each other and to better understand the depth of Meera's love to Das especially at certain situations.

The character Das and his affair with Meera has been introduced to the audience with his letter to Meera which she gets from one of her friends in college. In the letter Das mentions that he has gone home as he received an emergency telegram about his mother's critical health condition. Such an introduction for the character Das has helped the film in two ways. One, definitely his physical absence in the scenes make the audience more curious. Another, this helps to understand Meera and how she responds when Das is not being around with her. Meera looks dull and upset in Das's absence and Balu as a concerned brother notices changes in her on those days without knowing anything. There was a scene when Balu tries to make fun of Meera in the name of Das just to know how serious she is about her affair with Das. But Meera gets mood off and goes out because listening to anything unpleasant about Das's relation even as a joke could disturb her emotionally.

The scene when Meera openly argues with one girl in college assuming she is interested in Das shows her possessiveness on him and Meera even gets adream Das being with that girl in a bedroom and Meera while trying to take a knife hidden between files in her hand falls down to her leg and then she wakes up from the sleep. But the next day in college, Meera feels guilty about having a bad impression about that girl and easily apologises to her in front of Das for being rude the previous day. Meera explains this to Das as that she is getting really possessive of him and never wants to lose him. Meera confesses to Das that she feels like she got 'somebody' (Das) as her own and always willing to hold him tight.

Throughout the movie, the director had showcased the character 'Das' as a selfish, direct, rude and merciless person who takes advantage of the present situation however. The way Das reveals about his mother's death to Meera clears that he has no sentimentality and he is out of emotional stasis. Similarly, Das informing Balu about his decision to break up with Meera in order to pursue his career in psychology proves that he is just bothered about his wellness and convenience. Similarly, there are several scenes in the movie which shows Meera emotionally struggling to admit Das's approaches in life.

Meera and Her Sister in law

The sister in law character (Ambika), starred by actor Surekha appears only in the second half of the film. She was shown as an understanding, caring and lovely sister in law to Meera at the same time trying and helping her husband Balu to bring Meera normal to life.

The character of sister in law, Ambika was introduced to the audience when Meera was leaving the mental hospital after three years of treatment. The bond between Meera and her sister in law can be said as something different from usual stereotypical portrayal. Unlike the common notion of sister in law's fights, dramatic arguments and jealousy with each other, in this film Novemberinte Nashtam, Meera and her sister in law are shown as good friends. There is a change which happens to Meera in the appearance and behaviour before her mental treatment and afterwards. Previously she seems to be more talkative, funny and open to her brother Balu but after treatment she seems to be less expressive, and now her communication to Balu became through sister in law.

P.Padmarajan as a storyteller preferred to bring a new female character Ambika, sister in law of Meera to develop the story further. This can be related to the notion that there are few things only a woman is capable of understanding and doing, especially a sister in law character like Ambika could do to Meera. Because the changes in Meera definitely reflects on her behaviour, attire and communication and Padmarajan brings Ambika in the loop and later, the audience witnesses the bond shared by Meera and Ambika. The character Ambika, sister in law, seems caring Meera like a mother, carefully observing her changes and

problems. Ambika tries her best to understand Meera's mind and help her to come back to normal life.

When Balu and the father plans for Meera's marriage, instead of directly communicating her interest to Balu like initially, this time Meera prefers to converse with Ambika and refuses the proposal. This shows that now Meera has become more comfortable and convenient with sister in law than with Balu. The director has used one song, 'Arikilo..akalayo' to show the bond developing between them. There is a scene when Ambika and Meera visit Meera's college mate who is currently married, has a baby and is living a happy and engaged life. Then Ambika tries to make Meera understand about the need for a married life like her friend. These are few attempts of Ambika like a mother's stand helping Meera to bring back to normal life. When Ambika intimates Balu about her doubt on physical change happening to Meera followed by medical check-up confirms Meera is pregnant. Assuming Meera was not aware about this as it must have happened during her treatment period when she was abnormal, Balu and Ambika with the help doctor aborts the fetus. But later Meera tells Ambika she wanted that baby to reveal that Meera was aware about her pregnancy. Then Balu assigns Ambika to find out the truth, she openly asks about her doubt on Das to which Meera comfortably admits and confesses what all happened during her treatment period. This proves that Ambika always has an eye on Meera movements and her doubts were true. This conversation of Meera with Ambika is the only place the director narrates and lets the audience know about Meera's continued relationship with Das as there are no visual presentations. The way Meera still says about Das and what has happened between them from the mental hospital during treatment shows how she still feels about him. Padmarajan as a director brilliantly narrates this incident directly from Meera's angle with her dialogue helping to define her character better rather than visually producing the situation. Because the same thing can be communicated in different ways, Padmarajan centred Meera and preferred her verbal confession instead of direct visuals of it which strengthened Meera's emotions and thoughts seeing from her angle.

In the scene when Meera communicates to Ambika, the audience also gets to know that as a part of his job because Das has been with her in the mental hospital where Meera was treated, during which she felt absolutely normal like back to life even though she was at her mental worst. Because, Das's presence could comfort her and was a hope to bring her back to life and the way she narrates, it becomes clearer that they had extended to physical relationship and she still loves Das. But when Balu approaches Das to marry Meera, Das tries to ignore it and doesn't even admit about what had happened to her blaming there is no assurance about it as she was during her mental treatment.

Ending of Novemberinte Nashtam and Its Climax

Towards the end when Meera gets to know about Das's take on life with her through Balu she decides to visit Das without informing anyone. When Meera visits Das at his residence she behaves normal towards him in the bedroom she takes Das's photo frame with his divorced wife and takes a look. When Das approaches her to take advantage of the chance, Meera is ready to make love with him. This scene of the film was difficult to understand, justify or accept at the same time holds lots of importance. The director opens up a way for multiple perspectives to look into it. One, Meera was an innocent teenage girl who always loved his lover Das and liked to be with him. The other way is Meera, a teenage girl irrespective of mental issues happened due to her loved one still possessing sexual desire on him meeting physical need. At the same time Meera as a woman who decided to do revenge against what Das did on her can be another angle to look about Meera. However, Meera was a mentally disordered person who might not always have control over the actions and thus

murders Das. There is a scene when Meera replies to the nurse while leaving after treatment previously that she might come again to the mental hospital, like an intuition, this turns out to be true when the story ends.

The film closes with a write up appears on the screen dated on a November that Meera was found hanging committed suicide in room number eleven of mental hospital only then audience will get to know about what had happened to Meera after she murdered Das and how her story ends then. The director Padmarajan has put up this to be an open ended one. Meera being mental patient might have committed suicide as she was not mentally stable, Meera might have felt she no more wants to live in the world without Das as it was the only thing she always looked for, Meera might have felt guilty on killing Das and as a punishment she would have decided to end her life too are few possible perspectives about the way director concluded this film. Managing two extreme emotions, Love and Revenge has been blended together through the character Meera. This can be one of the brilliant and justifying stories by Padmarajan through the woman character, Meera. This movie was definitely made way ahead of those times or given to an audience who were not able to understand as it should be.

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